

# Conduct and outcomes: digest of the 2016 parliament elections

The Belarusian elections concluded on 11 September. They were condemned as “not corresponding to a number of key international standards” and “not a credible reflection of the will of Belarusian citizens” by the domestic election-monitoring groups “Human Rights Defenders for Free Elections (HRD)” and “Right to Choose-2016 (R2C)”.

The findings of domestic observers corresponded to those by observers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which emphasised in its [preliminary conclusions](#) the “long-standing systemic shortcomings” of the elections as well as “serious procedural deficiencies, inconsistencies and irregularities were observed during early voting, counting and tabulation.”

By some measures the organisation of the elections could have been worse. Some may cite improved rates of registration for opposition candidates, expanded debates on state TV, or the much touted ‘reforms’ to ensure observers would be able to stand within [three metres](#) of the counting table and that at least [one side](#) of the table would be unobstructed.

Unfortunately, as observers’ reports make clear, such improvements amount to little more than a veneer over a highly flawed election featuring massive voter turnout inflation and culminating in the same nontransparent and questionable vote count [reported](#) in past elections. Domestic observer groups captured concrete evidence of massive nationwide efforts to inflate turnout totals during the five-day early vote period (6-10 September ) and on election day (11 September ). The Central Election Commission (CEC) stated parliamentary turnout

was [74.8](#) percent, but observer reports particularly from parallel turnout counts suggest voter turnout was far lower.



In the first days of the early vote period, observers [noted](#) many cases of forced or incentivised voting in which [students](#), [convicts](#) or state [workers](#) were subject to pressure from administrators or managers to cast an early ballot. As the elections progressed, there were reports of “[carousel voting](#),” [ballot stuffing](#), and a significant number of [unsecured ballot boxes](#).

The most significant form of turnout inflation was conducted through blatant protocol manipulations in which turnout was artificially increased. The joint election monitoring coalition of political parties, R2C [covered](#) every polling station in nine [specific](#) parliamentary districts. This allowed them to conduct a parallel turnout count and document artificial turnout inflation at the [precinct](#) and [district-wide](#) level.

As the following chart shows in seven of the nine districts observed by R2C, their observer reports [conclusively show](#) the elections were invalid because they [failed](#) to reach the 50 percent turnout [threshold](#) (see a R2C table below).

Tell the Truth observers conducted a full [parallel turnout count](#) in Oktyabrskiy district #97. This is the much discussed district of Tell the Truth candidate [Tacciana Karatkievič](#), a former presidential candidate and United Civic Party (UCP) candidate [Hanna Kanapackaja](#), who was selected to serve in parliament.

According to observer data the total turnout for the district was 40.6 percent, nearly ten percent below the required turnout threshold, which if not met requires a new election. The commission reported turnout at [59.7 percent](#). Tell the Truth’s count uses official turnout for mobile voting since

observers could not observe the procedure and assumes 100 percent turnout in two polling stations where observers were stripped of accreditation.



In their final report, the civic election observation group [Human Rights Defenders \(HRD\)](#) shows how turnout discrepancies between PECs and observers' turnout counts skyrocketed during the last day of early vote as commissions, particularly in Minsk, faced the looming possibility of failing to reach the required turnout threshold. R2C [parallel turnout counts](#) show similar pattern of surging artificial turnout in some of their observed districts on the last days of early voting as exemplified in the following chart.

Both HRD and R2C reports showed that final efforts to ensure a high turnout were made on election day through abuse of mobile voting mechanisms. At Oktyabrskiy district #97, polling station #230, a Tell the Truth observer [claimed](#) the PEC had two lists of mobile voters and the discrepancy between the two constituted 176 people. In district #85 in Mahilioŭ, R2C noted that 12.8 percent of voters (7,981) cast their ballot by mobile ballot boxes on election day.

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The third major point of observer concerns in addition to organised voting and inflated turnout, was the vote count and tabulation process, which was described by HRD as “non-transparent for observers,” by [R2C](#) as “an unacceptable system” and by OSCE, which [emphasised](#) that the “tabulation process was assessed negatively, primarily due to procedural irregularities and a lack of transparency.”

Two of the CEC's touted reforms, allowing observers to be [three metres](#) from the counting table and [promising](#) that the

observers would have a clear view of one side of the table were [not followed consistently](#). Even when PECs left one side of the table unobstructed and allowed observers to monitor the vote count from the three-metre distance, the transparency of counting process remained flawed.



The OSCE preliminary report [stated](#), “ballots were counted by each PEC member separately rather than collectively,” thus making it difficult for observers to understand the votes allocated to a particular candidate. The decision not to count “collectively” – by holding up a ballot and announcing the results – did not come as a surprise, as the CEC Chair had [announced](#) before the election that this form of counting is not provided for in the law.

HRD [concluded](#) that 95.31 percent of their observers described the vote count as not transparent, particularly since observers were unable to see the content of ballots due to their distance from the count and the chaotic nature of the counting table. On election day, Tell the Truth observers who covered 27 of the 29 precincts in district #97 where UCP candidate Hanna Kanapackaja was selected for the parliament, described the count as “not transparent” in 22 of the polling places.

Efforts to control and verify the vote count were further complicated when observers were ejected from polling stations prior to the count. Reasons for dismissal included “[creating a nervous atmosphere](#)” and “[drinking](#).” R2C reported [30](#) incidents of observers being barred from PECs on election day.



[Polling station #2 in Kalinkavičy](#) (HRD) [Polling station #46 in Viciebsk](#) (R2C)

# After twelve years, opposition to the parliament: what does it mean?

Much of the attention following these elections has centred around the surprise move of the authorities to select two opposition candidates for the parliament, ending a twelve year opposition hiatus from parliament. The two candidates who were selected to assume seats in parliament are independent candidate [Aliena Anisim](#) and United Civic Party (UCP) candidate [Hanna Kanapackaja](#).

The conventional wisdom suggests placement of two oppositionists in parliament was a “[gift to the west](#)” in hopes Belarus might receive a more positive assessment of the elections and as a result speed a recent warming of relations. Foreign analysts [described](#) the move as an act of financial desperation to secure loans. If the parliamentary policy shift was indeed meant to improve perceptions of Belarus abroad, then the short term results are mixed.

The move has generated a series of positive stories in [Reuters](#), [Time](#), [Associated Press](#) and other western media suggesting that the political placement of opposition in the parliament is a sign of an improved electoral process in Belarus. This will likely be welcomed by the Belarusian authorities and may be promoted as a significant achievement by those advocating closer ties with Belarus and the West for any number of reasons.

Hanna Kanapackaja's selection for the parliament was far from predictable

It seems, however, to have had no significant effect on the assessment of elections provided by experts, as in the [OSCE's](#)

[preliminary election report](#) or the post-election statement by the [US State Department](#) in Minsk. These more appropriately focused on the overall conduct of the elections, which deeply flawed.

In addition to speculations of how Lukashenka is using the appointments in his geopolitical balancing game, there is internal [speculation](#) as to the reasons these two parliamentarians were selected. Aliena Anisim was [discussed](#) as a potential selectee to the parliament after the sudden withdrawal of the leading government candidate. Hanna Kanapackaja's selection for the parliament, however, was far from predictable.

Her party, UCP, is a traditional opposition party described as [populist](#) and [provocative](#) by the authorities and whose long time leader [Anatol Liabiedzka](#) was imprisoned after the 2010 elections. Kanapackaja's opponents included a government candidate, who was promoted through [state media](#), and former presidential candidate from Tell the Truth, Tacciana Karatkievič, who some [believed](#) would be given the seat. A blog post by political scientist Ihar Drako published three days before the election titled "[How to 'Finish' Karatkievič](#)" accurately predicted Kanapackaja's victory.

Drako described the government's likely the motives as 1) to show the west the opposition made it to parliament, 2) to mute local critics like UCP and 3) to diminish the political status and influence of Karatkievič, but to do so by letting another opposition candidate, rather than the authorities, defeat her. Former parliamentarian Siarhiej Skrabiec [attributed](#) her selection to added leverage the authorities would have over her because of her and her families business success, "if she would press the wrong button, not only her business would be under threat, but also the business of her father, her friends..."

# Profiles of the two ❌ opposition parliamentarians

The first of the two selected candidates, [Aliena Anisim](#), ran as an independent candidate in her native Staŭbcoŭski district #70 in Minsk region. Anisim is a respected linguist and part of the national-orientated intelligentsia. She works as Deputy Chair at the “Belarusian Language Society” and at the Linguistics Institute of the Academy of Sciences.

Anisim also hosted the program “Belarusian Language” on the state TV channel ONT. She was born in 1962 to a family of teachers. She studied at the philological faculty of Belarusian State University, and was active in the youth union “Majsternia,” one of the first Belarusian organisations (1980s) aimed at revival of Belarusian language and traditions.

The second opposition candidate, United Civic Party (UCP) member [Hanna Kanapackaja](#) was born in 1976. She is a lawyer and the owner of a successful private legal firm. She has been a UCP member since 1995 when the party held its first founding convention.

She ran at Oktyabrskiy district #97 in Minsk. Her father Anatol Truchanovič, also a UCP member, is a businessman and was among the [first official millionaires](#) in Belarus. Kanapackaja's parliamentary campaign was primarily [built](#) around UCP's national platform “[Million New Jobs](#)” and was supported by her professional background as a successful business owner and lawyer.

Both candidates announced they will accept their seats in parliament. In her first interviews after elections, Anisim [declared](#) that she will initiate a law on state support for the Belarusian language and ask parliament to found a national

university with Belarusian the language of instruction. [Aliaksiej Janukievič](#), head of the Belarussian Popular Front (BPF party) [revealed](#) his excitement at the new opportunities presented by Anisim's success to advance the status of the Belarusian language.



Kanapackaja [stated](#) that she will use her mandate to implement UCP's proposals and will work in parliament as a party member. She plans to propose amendments to improve electoral legislation so more opposition candidates could get into the parliament. She will seek the realisation of the "One Million New Jobs" program, including changes in entrepreneurship and unemployment tax laws and public administration.

Kanapackaja announced she would take the parliamentary seat only after extensive consultations with UCP party leadership. During a September 13 [press conference](#) announcing her decision, Kanapackaja [stated](#) there are no free elections in Belarus, but if such elections were held, she would win her seat. In a [Facebook](#) post she went further citing problems with manipulated turnout and a non-transparent vote count.

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UCP did not conduct observation at her district, though Tell the Truth did, and according to their observers, as noted previously, the count was highly non-transparent, and turnout failed to reach the threshold required by the election code. Tacciana Karatkievič, her competitor from Tell the Truth, did not contest the results and instead urged Kanapackaja to take the seat and work in the Parliament.

# Composition of the new parliament

Anisim and Kanapackaja will be joined in the parliament by a who's who of [bureaucratic insiders](#) representing state hospitals, regional executive committees, the military, state schools and other aspects of the authorities structure. [Ninety six percent](#) of selected parliamentarians were predicted to take their seats by the independent media Naša Niva.

Sixteen of the 110 parliamentarians will represent five parties, including UCP, and the Belarusian Patriotic Party headed by former pro-governmental presidential candidate and Cossack Ataman Mikalaj Ulachovič. The absolute majority of MPs are non-party. Seventy-three MPs are [members](#) of the pro-governmental association "Belaja Ruś" association. It is rumored "Belaja Ruś" [will transition](#) to a political party in the future.

In keeping with tradition, the parliament will have a relatively high percentage of female parliamentarians at 35 percent. Twenty seven of 28 incumbent MPs [retained](#) their seats.



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